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## Children's participation in Finnish pre-school education - Identifying, Describing and Documenting Children's Participation

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**Abstract:** This article describes, analyzes, and evaluates children's participatory in Finnish pre-school groups. Children's participation is viewed in the context of the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland (2010), in which children are considered active subjects, who interact with both other people and the environment. However, in practical data, collected via survey from pre-school educators, this ideology is restricted and the educators in pre-school groups focus on children's participation from a narrow point of view that reflects a lack of connection between the Core Curriculum goals for pre-school education and the actual participatory practices children face.

**Keywords:** Pre-school, Early childhood education, Core Curriculum, Participation, Pedagogy

### Introduction

Participation is a key concept, especially in the field of education research in the past ten years, when focusing on the child's point of view. Participation is associated with democratic values and adults sharing power with children and respecting their rights (UN, 1989; Hart, 1992). In the sociological

research, participation is considered from the point of view of the decisions and main events of a child's life (Woodhead, 2006). In educational research, the aim is to study and understand children as a subject of their own lives. Participation is not only considered as a child's property or right, but it is a related contextual concept in interaction and everyday life (James & James, 2008; Karlsson, 2012). In early childhood education, the issue of children's participation is often seen from quite a narrow view, as if it means simply listening to children voices (Clark, 2005).

From a more general view, the child is not seen as an actor isolated from his or her social and cultural environment, but rather as an active subject that interacts with both other people and the environment. This viewpoint has been adopted more often in recent years when the new sociological paradigm about children as competent actors and active agents rather than needy and helpless beings has been adopted as a part of early childhood education (Rogoff, 2008; Pramling-Samuelson & Sheridan, 2008). With this learning paradigm, the question of children's participation is a key aspect of both education and research. Young children's participation in early childhood education settings is a multidimensional issue, in which the key elements are well-being and active competence (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelson, 2001; Smith, 2002).

Research on early childhood education highlights a child's point of view, experiences, perspectives, and abilities to act and express ideas and views in different historical and social contexts (Smith, 2002; Karlsson, 2012). A wider viewpoint of participation as being involved, having influence, making independent initiatives, and learning to bear responsibility has been presented (Duncan, 2009; Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). Therefore, participation can also be considered as a developing skill of a child, where learning and practicing are important aspects to master as part of the participation (Emilsson & Folkeson, 2006; Hart, 1992). Young children's participation in early education settings can also be viewed as a common activity of interpreting the world and sharing experiences with peers and teachers who respect and listen to children and are interested in their affairs (Leinonen & Venninen, 2012).

Participation occurs within the interaction between a child and a teacher in a learning environment (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelson, 2001; Woodhead, 2006). In institutional early childhood education, many children suffer from a lack of interactive moments every day, because their daily routines follow scheduled timetables made by teachers and there is no room for them to practice self-expression (Nyland, 2009; Smith, 2002). On the other hand, children's everyday life in preschool settings is filled with activities that contain elements of democracy, such as negotiations and compromises, shared planning and above all listening to each other's views (Broström, 2012). Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) states that adults bear a responsibility to support children's participation, and they should be aware about this issue to avoid false participation, such as tokenism. When teachers and institutes rely on a socio-constructive learning paradigm and enhance children's participation, they also promote their capacity for agency learning in which children actively build peer cultures of their own. Their views and growing decision-making abilities mean that their right to be heard has been guaranteed and they can express themselves (Corsaro, 1997; Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009).

The focus of this article is to describe, analyze, and evaluate participatory practices in Finnish pre-school groups. Children's participation is viewed in the context of the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland (2010). Finnish pre-school is a one-year period of early childhood education in which only 6-year-old children take part before they attend the primary school. It has been considered as a transition path between kindergarten (children aged one to five years) and school (children aged seven years and above). The main goal of this research is to understand and describe children's participation based on the Core Curriculum and as experienced and documented by educators in Finnish pre-school groups.

In the Finnish laws of early childhood education and primary education are briefly described to define the main goals of the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education for readers. After that, we shall describe the context and methods for this study. Then the different aspects of participation from the Core Curriculum are detailed with the theories of participation in early childhood education. In the next chapter, the practices of participation in the sample pre-school groups are presented in the context of the Core Curriculum and theories. Finally, we summarize our findings up and draw conclusions about children's participation in both articles and practices in the pre-school context.

The main findings of this research are that even the concept of participation is lightly defined in the Core Curriculum it is considered that children should be guided to responsible activities towards other people and thus become responsible members of society. For reaching this goal children are considered active agents, who interact, share meanings and experience involvement towards pedagogical activities. Children's interests are considered important and taken account. However the in pre-school educators descriptions about emerging participation the considerations were not focused on active, socio-cultural learning paradigm. Only in play activities children were viewed as competent actors and issues focusing on support for participation were concerning choosing and decision-making in play. Therefor it seems that children participation will need more support and enhanced development in Finnish early childhood education.

### **Finnish pre-school education from the viewpoint of the law and the Core Curriculum**

Equal access to education and training is defined in the Finnish law on basic education (Act. 1998) as a goal-oriented starting point. Basic education, which as part of the pre-school education in Finland aims to secure sufficient consistency in education across the country, and thus the pre-school age educational equality is to be guaranteed.

The goal of teaching is defined in the Basic Education Act (1998) as children's growth towards humanity and becoming ethically responsible members of society with the necessary knowledge and skills to obtain involvement in their lives. In Finland, the United Nation's Convention of the Right of the Child (1989) has also been ratified to be part of policies concerning childhood institutions. The Basic Education Act anchors its goals for education and the promotion of equality. In institutional education in Finland the concept of pre-school education has been multidimensional and, thus, ambiguous, until 1998 when the concept of pre-school education is mentioned first time in the Law of Basic Education in Finland. This Act (1998) defines that pre-school education as part of early childhood education is systemically planned education for six year old children and states that the specific objective of pre-school education as a part of early childhood education is to improve children's learning skills. Finnish pre-school education is based on the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland, which were established 2000 after the Law of Basic Education in Finland and updated 2010 (Brotherus, Hytönen, Krokfors 2002; Brotherus 2004). In this curriculum the main objectives, goals, and contents for education learning are defined. Finnish pre-school education is also a part of early childhood education and professional pre-school teachers have a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education. In Finnish early childhood education, learning is understood as a socio-cultural process in which children are active meaning makers and competent actors (Corsaro, 1997; VASU, 2005) and meaning makers, who are tutored to explore their environment and initiate and organize their play activities (Karila & Kinos, 2011). Participation as the aim of education is expressed in such a way that the goal of teaching is to improve students' ability to take part in education and

otherwise develop themselves during their lives. With this learning paradigm, the question of children's participation is a key aspect of both education and research.

The minimum requirements for pre-school education are specified in the Core Curriculum. It emphasizes that, regardless of the location of the pre-school education, it must comply with the arguments of the Board of Education as established in the Core Curriculum. The general education goals, learning concepts, practices and the characteristics of the pre-school education in different areas of content are all fully described in the Core Curriculum. In practice, all this means that pre-school in Finland is one semester long and almost all (98.7 %) six-year-old children participate in free pre-school education guided by early childhood teachers who support and scaffold children's learning by socio-cultural learning methods, through playful activities (Kinos & Palonen, 2013).

## Context and Method

The present study took place in day-care centers in the Metropolitan Area of Helsinki (the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen) in May 2010. This is an urban area and the only metropolitan area in Finland. It constitutes the living environment of one-fifth of all Finnish children under school age. In Finland, every child has a right to communal early childhood education. In Finnish day-care centers, for every four children under the age of three or seven children over the age of three, the staff must include at least one educator with educational profession i.e. the teacher's degree. It is common that a work team consisting of three staff members is in charge of the pre-school group.

In this article, the participatory practices in Finnish pre-school groups are described, analyzed, and evaluated. More specifically, it will focus on how participation became visible in these practices. The research questions are:

1. How is participation manifested in the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland?
2. How does participation become evident through the descriptions about daily activities of pre-school educators?
  - 2.1 How do educators' describe children's participation in pre-school practices?
  - 2.2 What are educators' conceptions for supporting children's participation in pre-school practices?

The first part of our research data was the Core Curriculum of Pre-school Education in Finland (2010). It is a guiding document for pre-school educators when implementing school activities.

The second part of our data was based on a survey designed to measure the pre-school educators' beliefs and conceptions of the challenges to supporting children's participation in the communal early childhood education. The survey was part of the data collection of the VKK-Metro project (Venninen, Leinonen, Ojala & Lipponen, 2012). The project was conducted in collaboration with the University of Helsinki and the communal day-care of metropolitan area cities and its focus was on developing research-based tools and practices for supporting children's participation. The participants in this survey worked in communal pre-school groups as work teams (2-5 member/team). They were employees with different educational backgrounds. The teams were selected instead of the individuals, because the interest in the developing project was to create the discussion and reflective practices and ideas about the multi-professional working community. The study was conducted among teams, because teams plan and carry out the daily program in day-care centers and are the basic functional

and pedagogical units of the day-care centers. The communal responding was also assumed to increase the motivation and the objectivity of descriptions.

With the aid of a pilot survey, which included 82 descriptions of 12 qualitative variables about issues associated with the expression “children’s participation”, and through the various theories of participation, we began to design our survey for all of the teams in the Metropolitan area of Helsinki. The survey for all of the teams was conducted with a self-report questionnaire consisting of 99 Likert-type variables and 9 open-ended questions about participatory issues in pre-school groups.

The respondents, selected for this research were 174 pre-school groups’ educators’ teams (N = 568 educators); the children’s age was either 5-7 years or 6-7 years of age. Of all the respondents, 30 respondents were removed as they did not respond to the open-ended questions.

### Analysis plan

The analysis was carried out in three stages. First, we have examined the Core Curriculum for pre-school education and analyzed the data by deductive content analysis to describe how children’s participatory rights as well as their role as active agents should be understood in pre-school education. After that, educators’ descriptions of their daily participatory practices in pre-school groups in the spring 2010 have been analyzed with same method.

The analysis method for the Core Curriculum was abductive content analysis. Abductive analysis is a mixture of inductive and deductive analytical approaches. In the inductive approach, data about the phenomenon under investigation guides the analysis, and in the deductive approach, the analysis is described in order to be theoretically derived and the theory tested (Hyde, 2000; Mayring, 2000). These three different research approaches are visualized in Figure 1.

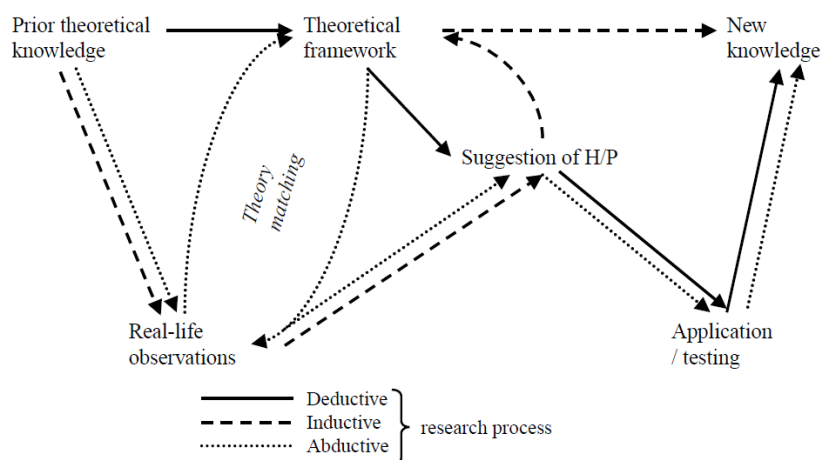


Figure 1 - Three dimensions of the research process (Spens & Kovách, 2006)

In abductive analysis, the key-element is interaction between the theory and the data about the phenomenon, where the researcher creates a framework of different theories together with the data in a creative process of “theory matching” (Kováč & Spens, 2005). In this process, the prior theoretical knowledge is presented in the introduction of this article to provide a guideline of the phenomenon studied in this article. After this, the data, in this case, the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland (2010) was analyzed together with theoretical frameworks. Finally, the built understanding of the phenomenon of participation in Finnish pre-schools was applied and tested with the second set

of data: the analysis of responses of early childhood education professionals from the survey are presented in the findings.

The Core Curriculum and the written descriptions about participation were analyzed by using content analysis. The unit of analysis was an idea or meaning, which could be a word or a couple of words, one sentence or several sentences. First, the curriculum was analyzed by reducing the text and then by raising the level of abstraction. Next, the text was classified to the clusters of pre-school mission and goals, the concept of learning, working and learning environment. Finally, the meanings of participation were added.

The open-ended responses to questions were the focus:

1. Please, describe a situation in your group, where children's participation becomes evident. How can participation become visible in the child's actions?
2. What kind of initiatives do children express in your group?
3. Please, describe the long-term activities developed by the children, and the development process in your group.
4. In what kind of decision-making processes are children involved in your group?

At first, the open-ended responses were classified to the descriptions of participation and what kind of experiences educators have considered as supporting participation. After this, classification was extended so that the analysis was first of all educators' descriptions of children's participation, then educators' estimates of children and their potential activities concerning participation. Third, educators' descriptions of children's initiatives and opportunities in decision-making were classified, and fourthly, descriptions of educators' actions to support children's participation were included. Finally, the Core Curriculum criteria and educators' descriptions were compared to each other from the point of view of participation.

## Findings

### Participation in the Core Curriculum of Finnish pre-school education

According to the content analysis of the Core Curriculum, the participation of children is only lightly adopted as a goal of pre-school education. In the curriculums' descriptions of the working culture in the pre-school, children's participation is rarely prominent and occurs at relatively external expressions. For example, it is expressed in the idea that it is a task of pre-schools teachers to help children to participate in responsible activities, comply with the rules, and appreciate others.

According to the Core Curriculum, *"Pre-school education is to promote the child's growth towards humanity and becoming ethically responsible members of society by guiding him to responsible activities and the agreed rules and the appreciation of other people"* (p. 6). If understanding that guiding children to these actions requires the participation of children, it can be said that in these descriptions of educational practices, children's participation is evident.

In addition, children's participation can be seen as interacting with others, and sharing meanings with teachers and peers (Rogoff, 2008). These elements were considered important also in our recent research about young children's participation in early childhood education settings, together with expressions of joy and membership in a group (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). Interaction is considered to be in order to contain at least some form of participation, shared responsibility and also

reciprocity with another person and the environment (p. 10). The joy of learning is also mentioned as well as joy of belonging *“Pre-school activities...should create opportunities for shared experiences...as well as joy of learning and meaningfulness”* (p. 9). Together with social activity, the pre-school activities should be based on children’s interests that refer to the child’s participation. This is also mentioned in the goals of pre-school education to enable children’s participation: *“[Pre-school education] provides opportunities for varied interaction with other people. We enrich children’s world of experiences and we help him to orient to new areas of interest”* (p. 6.).

In the Core Curriculum, a learning concept is quite constructivist. It emphasizes that learning is active, based on the previous data structures and the goal-oriented process. Indeed, that information is not transferred directly to the child by teacher, but the child him- or herself forms opinions based on the previous knowledge and experience (Rogoff, 2008). According to research, participation is active competence in which practicing choice-making, learning to assume responsibilities, and learning with teachers and peers are part of children’s everyday life in kindergarten (Leinonen & Venninen, 2012). The goal of Pre-school education is co-learning and co-operation skills, commitment and coping in everyday situations. Involvement in one’s own learning is also expressed in the Core Curriculum. The general goals of the curriculum also emphasize the child’s awareness of his or her own share of the actions; it may be a requirement for the child’s participation. These skills require the child’s participation in the pre-school activities: *“[A Child] practices the rules of the game of life and commitment to them. He or she internalizes society’s morality and understands its meaning as a part of everyday life. S/he learns how to better manage himself/herself and learns to cope with everyday activities”* (p. 7).

In the Core Curriculum of pre-school education in Finland, participation is viewed as taking part and it is emphasized that *“it is important that teachers and parents share the make sure, that a child participates in pre-school groups regularly”* (p. 7). However, participating in is not the same as feeling involved (Karlsson, 2012), but in the Core Curriculum taking part in education is considered as one way of creating experiences of participation. The Core Curriculum states, *“In order to . . . set out to achieve these aims, it is important that the teacher and the parents and pre-school educators are involved in the joint responsibility of the child’s regular participation in pre-school education”* (p. 11).

The learning environment has an important role in supporting children’s participation. Duncan (2009) suggests that early childhood education learning environments should have room for children’s independent initiatives and actions towards the physical environment. Similarly, the Core Curriculum considers children as active and independent learners: *“A good learning environment supports his/her activity and self-management. It provides opportunities for children to play and engage in other activities”* (p.10-11). An important part of the learning environment is free play, which supports participatory experiences.

As a word and as a concept, participation is expressed the first time in the Core Curriculum in a chapter dealing with organizing pre-school education. In this case, the Core Curriculum points out that pre-school education should promote participation in addition to interaction, cooperation, and solidarity. On the other hand, participation is only lightly related to social activities, such as interaction, cooperation, and common concepts of accountability. According to the Core Curriculum, *“Pre-school promotes supportive interaction, cooperation, joint responsibility and participation. Particular attention is paid to the child’s ability to influence their own and working together, as well as the operating environment”* (p. 10).

When the Core Curriculum introduces the general education and teaching aim, it emphasizes the importance of play: *“Learning through play is essential”* (p. 7). Play itself is included in the child’s participation and Bae (2009) emphasizes its importance for children to express

themselves and experience participation. In Core Curriculum however it is not specified how the play is viewed and does it enhance children's participation, but in more general in learning the idea of participation and child's role as active agent becomes visible, like in these utterances:

*Educators will take into account the child's need to learn through the imagination and play. . . . through the participation, educators support a child's growth, learning and well-being, as well as becoming a responsible human being and member of society...A child builds the new ideas and knowledge based on the new views and understanding in the past ...[a child] becomes aware of the impact of his or her own activities (p. 8).  
Learning is based on previous knowledge and learning experiences . . . Learning takes place in the interaction of learning new information and previously formed data structures (p. 10).*

In the pre-school work practices, participation occurs above all, in highlighting a child's position in the learning process. Play as an action method supports children's participation and helps teachers to adopt children's perspectives. However, sharing children's perspectives is not an easy goal for teachers in early childhood education (Emilson & Johansson, 2009). Therefore, in the Core Curriculum participation is viewed not only as a goal for children's experiences, but also as an activity of educators, specifically teachers. Supporting and scaffolding children's learning and development as well as their wellbeing is viewed as a participatory practice by educators. Again, the Core Curriculum spells this out:

*The teacher should support learning and she / he should guide the child aware of one's own learning and recognize that he/she may influence the success of learning. The teacher supports the learning, practical experimentation, testing, active participation, as well as other intelligence gathering and problem solving in interaction with educators and peers (p. 11).*

### **The conceptions of children's participation in pre-school practices**

The results from the survey give reason to suspect that educators understand the concept of participation in different ways and, therefore, supported the participation of children in different ways. Participation may be understood to mean, quite narrowly, only taking part in activities as in the following quotes by educators:

*Children take part in a common group of morning assembly (Group of 18 preschoolers, age 5 to 7) and Taking part in the pre-school group activities is encouraged throughout the school year and the morning gathering all take part according to their capabilities (Group of 13 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

Educators considered child's participation as choosing activities. Our results indicate that children are allowed to choose their activities and companions within the limits and rules of the pre-school. However, these choice situations concern only the child's own activities and this option occurred only during the free play. According to pre-school teachers:

*During free play, children can decide for themselves what to play or to play with nothing. (Group of 14 preschoolers, age 6 to 7)  
Educators planning the pedagogical activities and children may also choose what the children can play during the free time. (Group of 14 preschoolers, age 5 to 7).*



In a few descriptions, educators considered children's participation as complex, and possibly even harmful to daily pedagogics. They thought that it was the educators' duty to guide activities and bear the responsibility, and therefore they restricted children's chances to participate and choose, as is evident in the following quotes:

*... activities should be guided by educators.* (Group of 11 preschoolers, age 5 to 7)  
*Children without boundaries will need strict routines.* (Group of 23 preschoolers, age 5 to 7)  
*A child would not learn to be part of the group, if he or she makes all the decisions about his/her activities.* (Group of 23 preschoolers, age 6 to 7)  
*The pedagogical goals and evaluation will be blurred, if children may choose and make decisions of their own.* (Group of 21 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).

Educators also focused on creating participation from above, by requiring children to participate in activities, as shown in the quotes, which is reflected in shifts and the participation rules and power relations by giving children chances to bear responsibility.

*Children worked as assistants in the group, as well as in the kitchen.* (Group of 28 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).  
*Children operate as food-assistants: the child fetches the lunch-catering trolley, tells others about the food offered, and helps in serving the milk. The child is proud to participate in a responsible task. Every child knows how to be involved in this, each in turn.* (Group of 20 preschoolers, age 5 to 7).

In addition to choosing one's own activities, participating in a group to discuss issues of common concern and negotiation and to joint decision making become evident. Making the decisions of the book to be read, songs for the music events, or sports games played are examples that become evident in the descriptions of educators when dealing with children's participation. In addition, participation was understood as the ability to influence and participate in common activities such as agreeing on cultural rules. Several educators suggested that the participation of children was reflected in the rehearsing rules upon which the group agreed. These have been especially in-class group rules, and the rules for the schoolyard, that were shared with other groups in the kindergarten.

*In children's meetings important rules that ensure everyone's safety and comfort will be adopted.* (Group of 24 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).  
*In the autumn, children have discussed and agreed upon common rules.* (Group of 24 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).  
*Children work in small groups, in negotiating and making decisions together.* (Group of 26 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).

Participation was rarely considered through children's chances to participate in, organize, and implement activities for their peers with or without educators. In the following quotes, educators note that the children have also participated in the planning. Participation seemed also to be children's joint activity and community spirit in educators' descriptions. The elements of the joint action were in the negotiating different activities. Helping other children makes it possible to create a sense of community, as the following quotes show:

*We ask children for their opinions in the planning. We discuss in the morning meeting issues in which children are interested daily...children tell their thoughts, their ideas, and take part in the design of the day's activities, when we think about what we are doing with children each day. (Group of 7 preschoolers, age 7).*

*Children create together original dance and music performances that culminate in the spring festival. (Group of 23 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

*When we were in the hall, the children had the idea to start a circus school, an idea which the children allowed other children to join. The most capable child acted as an instructor. (Group of 17 preschoolers, age 5 to 7).*

### **Educators' support of children's participation**

Looking at the sense of community among children and educators, educators did not seem to act as members of the community. Educators were considered rather distant from the child-initiated activities such as play. The following quote was unique in the data: [Children] ask educators to join their games and play. Educators described their support for the participation of children by asking children what they want to do, or helping children to choose their actions as in following quotes. In addition, educators suggested that they encouraged children's participation by making it possible for them to have time enough for free play.

*We ask children about their wishes for activities. (Group of 19 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

*An educator will help the child to choose activities, if he or she finds it difficult. (Group of 21 preschoolers, age 5 to 7).*

*Play proposals, song suggestions, crafting proposals will be included in the design of the day and they can be transferred to outdoor activities nearby the park or the forest. (Group of 24 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

Educators also stated that they consider children's views, when designing learning environments and activities. Educators described supporting children's participation by accepting their suggestions.

*Already in the first individual meeting at autumn, we'll focus to find out the child's interests, and we try to take them into account when designing the learning environment and children's play corner. The child becomes delighted, because he/she has been acknowledged. (Group of 24 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

*In early autumn, we agreed with the children, all the things they'd like to do during their pre-school year. Possibly, the wishes are carried out and most of all the wishes come true (baking, exercise, visiting picnic sites, biking, etc.). (Group of 21 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

One of the teams reported that they listen to descriptions of children's learning on a daily basis. In other groups, children's participation was developed through learning assessments. In one case, the children were brought up learning social skills that educators thought would strengthen participation. They commented on these skills as follows:

*We discuss daily children's matters on a daily basis: how has the day gone, what have they learned, was the learning repugnant or difficult? (Group of 23 preschoolers, age 6 to 7).*

*Children's effective self-assessment of their own learning would be nice.* (Group of 21 preschoolers, age 5 to 7).

*The group has spent a lot of time grouping, and social skills training. The group learned during a year to work together almost seamlessly. Children are able to work together with everyone and do not quarrel.* (Group of 7 preschoolers, age of 7).

### **Conclusion of the main findings**

The main findings in this research were that in the Core Curriculum (2010), participation manifests as multidimensional issue that is characterized as child's interaction with teachers, peers and the environment. However in educators' views these aspects of participation do not become evident: Children's chances to influence and reproduce the environment and its construction are few. Educators seem not to pay special attention to children's ability to influence their own and communal work. Furthermore, children's awareness of their own learning as active agency is highlighted in the Core Curriculum, but educators' considerations about children's participation this is not discussed. Children's participation can be considered through viewing children as active agents, who, according to theories and the Core Curriculum, interact, share meanings and experience involvement towards pedagogical activities. In educators' views children's interests are mentioned to be taken account, but otherwise this active agency does not become evident.

When comparing the Core Curriculum with educators' implementation of participation in pre-school education play activities were emphasized as important element. The Core Curriculum states the importance of learning through play, but the content of that participation, or how it should appear, is not described. Furthermore, it emphasized the play activity in the light of learning, but did not specify in more detail what kind of learning was in focus. Educators' responses emphasized the so-called free play and the opportunity to choose, within certain limits, a form of play and playmates. Children's own participation emerges mainly in play according to the educators, but even there it does not exist as part of the children's learning process.

In addition to forms of play, rules become evident in the Core Curriculum (2010) and in educators' descriptions. In the Core Curriculum, children's responsibility in activities and evaluation of learning are emphasized as valuable in pre-school education. On the other hand, educators' descriptions emphasized compliance with the rules in addition to children's participation in rule making; in this process educators emphasize the aim of helping children learn responsibility and respect for each other. In this issue about rules the educators and the Core Curriculum's viewpoints are found to be quite similar.

Concerning children's perspectives, it is worrying that the phenomenon of children's participation has different meanings in the Core Curriculum and the teachers' guiding principles of education practice. Thus, now, the interpretations of the importance of children's participation and contribution to activities are absent from pre-school education.

### **Discussion**

In this article, the focus on children's participation was based on educators' descriptions as well as a content analysis of the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland (2010). We considered questions about the manifestation of children's participation in the Core Curriculum and how these manifestations do become evident in pre-school educators' descriptions and conceptions of support.

The results from the survey show that the issue of participation is considered important for supporting children's self-initiated learning through play in the Core Curriculum. According to research, participatory experiences can enhance children's self-esteem and promote better decision-making and protection of children by teachers. For example, focusing on children's participation can lead to a better understanding of children's competence, vulnerability, and power issues (Mayall, 1999; Sinclair, 2004). Nevertheless, educators understand participation from a quite narrow viewpoint as taking part or being present. This means that children's participation is limited in Finnish pre-school education practices, and it also seems that educators have not considered children's participation as an essential principle or goal of their pre-school pedagogy.

Children could experience participation in their play activities according to educators' descriptions. Play has an important role in children's participation in early childhood education. According to other research, it seems that the true practice of children's participation emerges mainly in free play (Bae, 2009; Sheridan and Pramlig-Samuelsson, 2001). Bae (2009) has also raised concerns about the role of play in early childhood education, and she states that only in play can children act as if they have full power of their actions. This can be considered as a part of learning practical democracy. Participation contains many skills of interaction and democracy and these skills that enable children's participation do not develop without practice and repetition. Unfortunately, these skills are not part of the curriculum, but they are put into practice within daily routines: waiting for one's turn, sharing toys and materials, and listening to what others have to say are all skills that a child studies together with a teacher (Göncü, Main & Abel, 2009). The Core Curriculum of Pre-school education in Finland seems to lack goals that would help teachers to understand children's participation as a more holistic goal for their pedagogy. Early childhood education seems not to be considered as part of democratic education and place and space for practicing skills for participation and agency, as seen in this study.

Questions about other rights of children (i.e., protection and provision) (UN, 1989) also exist when developing of children's participation. This viewpoint requires a more holistic focus on participation. Protection and provisions seem to go hand-in-hand in the results of this article, where educators seemed to want to protect children from having too much power too early. Participation is considered to have elements such as fulfillment of needs and learning in safety (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013), and according to this research it would be essential not to differentiate participation too widely from the other rights. Safety issues and a teacher-guided action culture can prevent a teacher from adopting the children's perspective (Nyland, 2009). The results of this research show that the idea of participation as a children's right to have influence in their daily life in ECE institution is quite remote in both the Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education in Finland (2010) as well as educators' practical descriptions of children's participation. The distance between the educators' responses and children's participation in their own learning will remain, although that participation is part of the Core Curriculum (2010) and therefore should be considered in pre-school pedagogy every day.

In institutional early childhood education, many children suffer from a lack of daily interactive moments, because their daily routines follow tightly scheduled timetables created by teachers who offer children little opportunity to practice expressing their views (Nyland, 2009; Smith, 2002). Bae (2009) has also been worried about children's chances for participation in Norwegian early childhood education. She maintains that children and teachers may not share the common viewpoint towards children's competence and agency and suggests that by observing children's play with systematic methods teachers will find ways of supporting children's participation. In our recent study (Venninen & al, 2013) it became evident that by focusing on constraints that prevent participation and

developing practices by reflection the teachers could influence these constraints and enhance children's participation in daily activities in early childhood education.

The Council of Education and the Ministry of Culture organized a national assessment of the quality of pre-school education, and published a report in 2012. In the evaluation findings, children's participation did not appear in pre-school pedagogy's strengths, but it was seen as requiring development (Hujala et al., 2012). In conclusion, the teams stated that improvements are required to realize the Core Curriculum in practice. For example, weaknesses were found in pre-school children's participation processes. In Finland the Core Curriculum of Pre-school education is currently under reformat and the new curriculum will be valid in 2016. In the draft of the new curriculum (9.9.2013) children's participation is considered to be part of the action culture of pre-school education as well as children's right, and it will be determined to be right to have an influence in one's everyday life and have one's opinions considered (see also UN, 1989). In the draft, the focus of participation is also on experiences of decision making that children will have when they participate in their pre-school activities and environment, and therefore in learning about the meaning of rules, trust and shared sense of community. It is important that children have experiences of participation and active agency. This forthcoming curriculum emphasizes that participation is not viewed as an attribute of children, but as a skill that develops with other skills. The implementation process of the new curriculum would offer interesting research opportunities to focus on enhancement of children's participation and pedagogical support for it in pre-school settings.

With the research on children's participation, the issue of how to support children's participation is important and the meaning of interaction between teachers and children has also been noticed. Children's capacity to formulate and express views, and take part in decision-making is highly dependent on the context, and especially the extent to which teachers can support and help children's participation (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Smith, 2002). When the reality of pre-school education is compared with the Core Curriculum, it is clear that teachers need to create situations in which the child has the opportunity to practice participation. To support this, participation could be viewed as process of pedagogical development, where reflective practices have found to be effective way for developing (see Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). This concept of supporting children's participation through reflective development would be essential to observe further also in pre-school education.

With this research, it became evident that in Finnish pre-school education practices, children's participation is understood from a quite narrow perspective and therefore children's chances to experience participation are limited. In the future, the phenomenon of participation should be considered from more holistic and broad perspectives on the child and interaction in a pre-school context. To teachers this means that supporting children's developing skills of having responsibility and being an active agent in their society requires chances to participate in a pre-school institute where democratic values are considered essential. Taking children's perspectives about their life and daily activities into account and viewing the child as a developing and learning actor means that children and teachers may plan, implement, and evaluate pre-school pedagogy together, making meanings to a new way of realizing early childhood education. From this perspective, the essential goals of education (stated in the Act, 1998 and in the Core Curriculum of Pre-school education in Finland, 2010), the support of the development of the child toward humanity and ethical responsible membership of society, will be realized. Nordic research on democracy has shown that in practice early childhood education will require more critical pre-school education (Broström, 2012; Tholin & Jansen, 2011). It also means, that in future Finnish pre-school education practitioners are required to introduce themselves to the scientific and critical research tradition of Nordic early childhood education and take

part in it to make sure that democracy will be included in Finnish early childhood education in theories and in practice.

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